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ABSTRACT

Critical reflection refers to an adaptation of civic literacy theory by educators seeking to promote the development of learning communities, taking an analytical approach to educational institutions. Critical reflection is being combined with the praxis approach, which stresses investigating issues, acting based on findings, subjecting outcomes to personal reflection, and reapplying the cycle, to develop a learning culture in which teachers act as guides and assessors. As compelling as learning culture theory is, however, it will have little impact without a design for systemic change that involves the following five key institutional systems: communications, professional development, mission redefinition, educational delivery, and self-correction. Further, a five-stage model has been developed for involving all constituents in the process of designing a learning culture that includes telling stakeholders of benefits, selling the vision, testing the new vision/mission statements, consulting with stakeholders, and co-creating the new mission with stakeholders. The change process must be able to adapt coherently to unpredictable environmental conditions, cope with complex systems and limited funding, and develop flexible response systems. Finally, the praxis process will produce a new paradigm consisting of a learning culture that instills a desire to learn and teaches students how to learn, a mission statement that identifies who the organization serves, and a significant re-engineering of educational institutions. Contains 13 references. (HAA)

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GIFTS DIFFERING: CRITICAL REFLECTION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE CREATION OF A LEARNING CULTURE

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Introduction: Critical Reflection

The millennium arrives in a mere 34 months! As we approach this watershed, our educational institutions are predictable only in their unpredictability. Society seems to be aware of the danger inherent in extrapolating the future from what has happened in the past. The emergence of an interest in critical reflection suggests that educators are willing to examine new paradigms.

Critical reflection is an amalgam of civic literacy theory as articulated by scholars as diverse as Amitai Etzioni (American University), John Gardner (National Civic League), David Mathews (Kettering Foundation), and Estela Mara Bensimon (USC), and the work of John Dewey as recaptured by a variety of educators seeking to promote the development of "learning communities." The process takes an analytical approach to educational institutions. Existing structures and processes are examined to determine whether they foster the development of truth, freedom, and justice, while simultaneously enhancing learning and promoting change.[1] The theory is being combined with an operational procedure that engages the change process.

Praxis: Marrying Theory and Application

For the past 10 years, researchers including Friere, Habermas, and Brookfield have presented a design for learning based on a series of processes:

- investigation and exploration
- action based on empirical findings

- outcomes subjected to personal reflection related to goals or purposes
- reapplication of the cycle

In the praxis environment, the teacher performs the role of guide, coach, and assessor. The design places emphasis on the learner's past and current experience and allows the learner to apply newly developed knowledge to "real life" situations. The contextual element of learning is stressed. Learners interact to validate individual experience. Further, they engage in collaborative problem solving. Finally, they refine their understanding of how skill or insight is altered by context, then reapply their knowledge to other "real world settings."[2] The praxis design is essential to the development of a learning culture.

Locus of Control: Transferring the Substance of Power

In the early 90's reality therapist William Glasser began applying his theories to education. He suggested that the emphasis in the classroom must be on responsibility. "We all choose what we do and we are responsible for the choices we make." His explanation of teaching/learning is that teachers assist students in developing a process for selecting the best choices and allow them to do so.[3]

The traditional classroom is ineffective at implementing the new paradigm. There is a design that transfers the locus of control from teachers to students. Further, it reorganizes the learning process into a group

activity. New issues are investigated, higher order thinking and problem solving are included and contexts are introduced that provide an expanded dimension of reality. Transition to the learning culture is an important step in preparation for the 21st century. The steps in the process include:

- Relating: learning in the context of experience
- Transferring: learning in the context of building upon what students have already mastered
- Applying: learning in the context of using information for problem solving
- Experiencing: learning in the context of exploration, discovery, and innovation
- Cooperating: learning in the context of sharing, communicating, and group decision making.[4]

The systems theorist Peter Senge suggests that implementing the learning culture will result in the development of a process that synthesizes "adaptive" and "generative" behaviors that lead to innovation, problem solving, and creative problem avoidance.[5]

Human Systems: Integrating Structure & Function

Learning culture theory is attractive and important. Yet, without a design for systemic change, it will have little impact. In 1996, the Community College Futures Assembly (University of Florida) identified the steps necessary to make the structure functional. Their design includes five human systems that collaborate to develop a learning organization. The systems are:

- Communications System: Across the campus, people at all levels are defining effective learning strategies.
- Professional Development System: All employees are committed to personal growth; the institution is committed to providing the resources needed for development.
- Mission Redefinition System: The mental models which drive the organization undergo continuous assessment; change, risk taking, and constructive criticism are encouraged.
- Variable Delivery System: Diverse designs for fostering learning are implemented; all student learning styles are accommodated.
- Self-Correction System: Continuous improvement is an inherent part of every organizational system; all outcomes assessment is based on student learning.[6]

Currently no institution has implemented all of these systems completely. However, across the country, dialogue is under way, both on campus and in the communities served. The focus is on implementing a praxis process including action, reflection, and action. Perhaps the best summary of the current status was made by Anne-Lee Verville, general manager of education and technical computing at IBM, in her summary statement regarding what business needs from higher education. "The challenges we face . . . we must face together--united as a team to refocus our efforts on teaching students how to learn and how to use information and technology--so that they are well prepared for a natural transition from the classroom to the office and back again."[7]

Community: The Critically Reflective Prism

The community college appears to be at a critical watershed in its history. New learners, new technology, changing resource bases, and a recognition that collaboration is likely to be the hallmark of the 21st century suggests that "staying the course" is likely to result in decline. Myran assumes that "the best future . . . lies in leapfrogging the limitations of excessive bureaucracy . . . to a new focus on learning requirements and the success of learners and communities being served." He presents a five-stage model for involving all constituencies in the process of designing a learning culture.

Stage One: Telling
The members of the college community share the vision/mission of the institution; emphasis is placed on how stakeholders benefit.

Stage Two: Selling
College staff use strategies to enroll community stakeholders in the vision/mission; they promote shared commitment.

Stage Three: Testing
College staff place the vision/mission in writing; community stakeholders are encouraged to provide refinement and redesign.

Stage Four: Consulting
College staff arrange for a series of structured dialogues with community stakeholders; input is gathered, synthesized, then used to refine vision/mission.

Stage Five: Co-Creating
All participants in the development process are encouraged to identify roles that they wish to play in making the vision/mission real; the result is

shared ownership and enhanced likelihood of success.[8]

The leadership challenge facing college personnel is to guide the development process so that the learning culture concept has wide appeal and becomes an integral part of everyone's active aspirations.

The Assessment Scenario: Getting to Yes

The concept of designing a learning culture through a praxis process appears simple upon initial examination. Further investigation suggests a far different conclusion. Peter Vaill, professor of human systems at George Washington University in D.C., describes the complex, turbulent, ever-changing environment in which the process has to occur as "permanent white water." The concept has five factors which drive change:

- Environmental conditions continually present surprises. There is need for coherent responses beyond ad hoc invention.
- Complex systems tend to produce novel problems. The result is lack of relevant data or planned response systems.
- Environmental conditions feature events that are "messy" and ill-structured. Dealing with these conditions demands the involvement of cross-functional teams that expand beyond divisional boundaries.
- These events are often extremely costly. Scarce resources will be taxed; there are limited opportunities for solution.
- Environmental conditions raise the issue of recurrence. There is need for a flexible response system; there is no other way to protect against all eventualities without paralysis.[9]

Vaill suggests that all members of the organization develop "systems thinking" modalities to survive in permanent white water. He defines the process as simultaneously holding the whole in mind while investigating the interaction among the components of that whole.[10] Praxis has significant possibilities for fostering systems thinking. Its elements describe the evolution of synergy, a critical incident in the emergence of a learning culture.

Rothstein provides three other contextual elements that are germane to the survival process.

> Sharing Information. The praxis process requires that personnel have access to information so that they can take responsibility for their actions.
>
> Developing Self-Managed Teams. Glasser's transfer of locus of control is based on a praxis-driven analysis coupled with the capability to make and implement decisions. These groups must be willing to be held accountable for their actions.
>
> Creating Autonomy Through Boundaries. The white water issue demands a flexible structure. The paradox allows for risk within support and accountability within the knowledge base. As a result, there is increasing success in problem solving.[11]

These tools will allow the organization to ride the crest of the permanent white water, not be capsized by it.

Conclusion: Praxis and the Learning Community--An Essential Bond

There are two elemental truths inherent in the evolution of a learning culture. First, change will continue; the praxis process is a useful tool for managing change so that it does not overwhelm us. The second truth is that our constituents will continue to demand a greater

say in their education. Again, the praxis process when applied in a learning culture context enhances the achievement of their desire. This collaborative initiative will produce a new paradigm.

What will the paradigm consist of? The League for Innovation in the Community College and IBM provide a description:

A. A "learning culture" is based on the following processes:

- Instilling in learners a desire to learn
- Teaching learners how to learn
- Facilitating interactions among students, instructors, information, and community
- Recognizing that learning is a lifelong process

B. The paradigm's vision/mission states:

Who do we serve? Ultimately community colleges serve society and their local communities. More directly, they serve learners. The implication is that adopting the mission will require significant structural and functional change.

C. The re-engineering initiative of the paradigm is based on the following questions:

- What policies need to be changed?
- What are the critical success factors?
- What is the impact of change on the college, faculty, students, staff, and community?
- What support and training is mandated by change?
- What is the relationship between cost and benefit?[12]

There are no clear, precise, or universally applicable answers to these questions. There is a Chinese proverb that states the longest journey begins with the first step. We have taken the step. Brookfield provides reinforcement for continuing the journey.

- "On a personal level, it nurtures loving relationships.
- On a social level, it makes collective effort possible.
- On a political level, it undergirds the creation and maintenance of democracy.
- Teachers who develop [the learning culture] are some of the most important people in the world."[13]

Enjoy the journey.

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